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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001753

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OFFICIALS

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND COMMANDER  
GENERAL ABIZAID'S OCTOBER 11-12 VISIT TO BAHRAIN

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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¶1. (S) General Abizaid, we warmly welcome your October 11-12 visit to Bahrain. Your Bahraini interlocutors remain concerned about heightened tensions with Iran and will want to hear your views on U.S. plans to contain Iran, with specific reference to Iran's nuclear ambitions. The GOB is suspicious of Iran's nuclear program and its assertiveness in dealing with the Arab Gulf States but remains engaged in a "correct" bilateral relationship. An interagency delegation will visit Bahrain October 18-19 to promote the U.S. Gulf Security Dialogue and discuss possible developments in linking GCC air defense capabilities to deter the Iranian threat. Bahrain is closely watching political and security developments in Iraq and is concerned about the potential for civil war and resulting sectarian violence spilling over into the region. In an effort to support allied operations in the region, the King proposed Bahraini participation in CTF-150, and discussions have begun on this with the U.S. Navy. Bahrain passed and implemented a counter-terrorism law that specifically criminalizes conspiracy, but the public prosecutor judged that the law's provisions did not allow him to charge several young Sunni extremists who confessed recently to planning to travel to Afghanistan for "jihad." The King announced that parliamentary and municipal elections will be held on November 25, and politicians and political societies representing a broad range of opinion will participate. A recent report alleging a senior government official's organized attempt to sway election outcomes has roiled the political scene. End Summary.

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Dealing With Iran  
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¶2. (C) The Bahraini leadership is greatly concerned about increased tensions between the international community and Iran. Bahrain hosted a two-day conference in mid-September for GCC countries during which the Interior Minister expressed concern about GCC countries finding themselves caught in the middle of nuclear powers. GOB continues to express interest in improving its air defense posture and has inquired about obtaining Patriot missiles, a capability that is currently beyond the limits of FMS/FMF. The Office of Military Cooperation is working to obtain funding for the Bilateral Air Defense Initiative (BAIDI), which will provide theater ballistic missile early warning and will integrate with the HAWK A system that the Bahrainis have already procured. An interagency delegation will visit Bahrain October 18 and 19 to discuss next steps in the Gulf Security Dialogue. The U.S.-organized Proliferation Security Initiative Leading Edge exercise will take place in Bahrain at the end of October. The boarding and interrogation

portion of the exercise will take place in Bahraini territorial waters.

¶3. (C) Bahrain's relationship with Iran is complex. The Bahraini leadership is united in its suspicion of Iranian intentions regarding Bahrain and often sees an Iranian hand in incidents involving Bahrain's Shia community, which comprises some 70 percent of the country's citizens. They are convinced Iran seeks to develop nuclear weapons and assert its influence around the region. At the same time, Bahrain faces the reality that it must live with its large neighbor across the Gulf. Bahrain maintains "correct" but not warm diplomatic relations with Iran, with Bahraini leaders welcoming Iranian officials when they visit. The economic relationship is based on Bahraini imports of Iranian fruit and other foodstuffs and some Iranian investment in Bahrain. It is not clear that the Bahraini leadership has come to grips with how it will handle efforts to ratchet up the pressure on Iran if that includes, for example, calls for cutbacks in trade and engagement.

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Next Steps on Iraq  
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¶4. (C) The GOB publicly supports U.S. operations in Iraq, but as Crown Prince Salman told VADM Nichols October 4, it believes Iraqi forces should be moving to the front lines in place of coalition forces. The CP commented that Iraqis have become lazy because international forces are protecting them.

You could brief your interlocutors on the state of operations in Iraq and urge them to continue their public support of the Iraqi government. The GOB's greatest concern related to Iraq is that sectarian tensions and violence could

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spill over into Bahrain. Bahraini officials will support measures to reduce sectarian violence while recognizing that the situation in Iraq is extremely difficult.

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Participation in CTF-150  
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¶5. (C) The King and CP have affirmed their interest in the Bahraini Navy participating in coalition operations in the region, in particular in Combined Task Force (CTF) 150, which patrols the Arabian Sea. VADM Walsh told the CP October 4 that Navcent and the Bahraini Navy are engaged in a constructive conversation about Bahrain's participation. VADM Nichols noted that Bahrain could participate in many ways, including information exchange, placement of liaison officers, or commitment of ships and other resources.

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Counter-Terrorism Law  
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¶6. (S) A counter-terrorism bill entitled "Protecting Society from Terrorists Acts" entered into force in August. The law defines the types of acts considered to be terrorism, applies tough penalties, and criminalizes conspiracy to commit terrorist acts. There is some question about whether the conspiracy clause will hold up given the constitutional court's June decision that a similar article in the penal code was unconstitutional. In a first test of the law, the prosecutor general in late September released eight Bahrainis on bond following an investigation into possible terrorist activities. Although several members of the cell admitted to planning to travel to Afghanistan for "jihad," the prosecutor general decided he did not have enough evidence to charge them under the CT law.

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Elections Announced for November 25  
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¶7. (C) The King announced September 28 that the first round of parliamentary and municipal elections will be held on November 25 and the second round one week later on December ¶12. All of the formerly boycotting political societies have registered with the government and announced their participation in the elections. The new parliament will include a much broader cross-section of Bahraini political opinion, enhancing its credibility. A recently leaked report drafted by a former advisor to a minister and senior member of the ruling family alleges that the minister had organized a secret team and disbursed over \$2.5 million in an attempt to sway election results. The resulting uproar has roiled the political scene with many politicians and societies demanding an investigation and removal of those involved in the conspiracy. Possibly in response to the outcry, the King announced that e-voting would not be used in the elections, a key demand of activists and oppositionists, and could result in truly independent election monitors being allowed to deploy.

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